

St. Francis of Assisi on the 19<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost. October 4, 2015. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods, Freeland. Nigel Taber-Hamilton

Usually – and with good reason – we celebrate this day focusing on St. Francis' relationship with all creation, and especially with animals. We bless them in the afternoon, as we do today. What we remember about Francis, though, is only to do with the second half of his life. There's another story about Francis that – though well known – we almost never hear. So here's that story.

More importantly, though, here's that story along with the story of two other people.

Last Wednesday (September 30<sup>th</sup>) a Georgia woman was executed by the State. Kelly Renee Gissendaner was sentenced to death for the 1997 stabbing murder of her husband – one of a handful of death-row inmates who were executed even though they did not physically partake in a murder.

While she was in prison, Kelly Gissendaner experienced a conversion. She became a Christian in more than name – actually she became an Episcopalian, though it doesn't much matter the Christian "flavor." She became a Christian in more than name. She graduated from a theology program. She repented of her actions, profoundly and deeply sorrowful for her part in the murder of an "amazing man who died because of me."

When she was strapped to the execution table she began to sing "Amazing Grace." Some have said: "so what?! She got what she deserved!"

Despite a tremendous number of last-minute pleas, including from Pope Francis, that she be spared because she was an example of someone who had truly reformed, she was injected with lethal chemicals, and killed by the State of Georgia – singing "Amazing Grace" as she died.

*"Amazing, grace! How sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now I'm found; was blind, but now I see."* The author of those lines, John Newton, was a slave-ship captain, responsible, in his own words, for the enslavement and murder of other human beings. He experienced a conversion when his life was threatened by a storm at sea. He repented of his actions, profoundly and deeply sorrowful for his part in the murder of other human beings. He became a Christian in more than name. He graduated from a theology program, and was ordained as an Anglican priest. Then he wrote "Amazing Grace." What "Amazing Grace" says is this: forgiveness and redemption are possible regardless of sins committed and that the soul can be delivered from despair through the mercy of God.

Francis Bernardone – the original "Francis" – was born in 1181 at Assisi, Umbria, Italy into a wealthy trading family. He lived a lavish and irresponsible life. At the age of twenty, he went to war against Perugia. There was only one battle during which Francis was captured. The battlefield where he surrendered had quickly been covered with the bodies of butchered, mutilated men, screaming in agony. As was standard, most of the surviving Assisi troops were immediately killed. Francis was spared because he was worth something - a person who could be ransomed. So he was sent to prison, and kept in a dank cell for over a year.

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Francis Bernardone, John Newton, Kelly Gissendaner All guilty of involvement in the taking of other human beings lives.

We will never know who Kelly Gissendaner might have become because - unlike John Newton and Francis Bernardone - she was not afforded that opportunity. Her fate makes a mockery of the claim that this is a Christian country, and it challenges the suggestion that we are morally more advanced than our ancestors. In fact, more people – and especially more civilians – have died in war and genocide since 1900 than in all of the rest of recorded human history. No matter what Kelly Gissendaner did, Francis would have followed what Jesus said to do: in the face of true repentance, forgive. Act out of love not hate, act out of joy not anger. Act out of peace not violence.

But for Francis, that was a way of living that didn't mark the first half of his life. It's only in the second half of his life that he became the truly amazing human being we recall today. Like John Newton – and Kelly Gissendaner – he learned through bitter experience and deep personal failure – a failure that involved complicity with the killing of other human beings – not only the lengths that we humans can go to when it comes to violence, but also the potential in the human soul for goodness, for joy, for peace.

It seems as if it's only out of some deep, dark place that we humans can get to a moment where we get perspective, and we can come (not do come, but can come) to a place of profound self-understanding, a place of perspective that offers us a vision of possibility.

What we do with that moment, that place, that vision, tells the tale of our lives.

For Francis, he came to see the profound worth of every created thing – not just every human being, but every animal, every plant, every rock – everything. All of it, he saw, was a gift. It was as if he finally recognized that God had more than one book, that creation itself serves as God's "other Book." God speaks not only from the pages of the bible, but the pages of creation; God teaches not only from words written on a page, but words written in the sky, on the land, in the seas, and on and in every living creature.

All of God's creation perfectly praises God because each element does what it was intended to do. The Sun praises God by giving the world light; the wind praises God by bringing every kind of weather; and the Earth praises God by sustaining us through producing fruits, flowers and herbs. And so creation teaches. But in order for us to learn these Godly lessons we have to be open to instruction, we have to be careful and reverent observers of God's handiwork, and we have to seek to live in harmony with God's handiwork. We do that, ultimately, by giving praise to God.

We live most authentically if we live in the way God intended for us to live – in our respect and

reverence for creation; through loving one another amid difficult times and by being peacemakers who seek reconciliation. Just as the Sun is most genuinely itself when providing light and warmth, we humans are most truly ourselves when we sow love, forgiveness, faith, hope, light, joy, and peace.

But the sad truth is, at the moment, anyway, that we are not living up to this vision, that there is more dissonance than harmony in God's creation, and we are the ones who are responsible.

Our black-and-white responses to the complexities of living lead to hard-and-fast decisions about human life and human community; we are swayed too easily by high words that propose unjust solutions to real-world realities; we remain silent in the face of demagoguery; we fail to act in those moments when we know that inaction is simply immoral.

Thank God that Francis survived his sinfulness! Thank God that others didn't act unilaterally based on the past, and thus allowed a flawed and broken life to be healed, and thus to heal so many others.

That is one of the great reasons why Francis is important for us: he is a witness to the possibility of repentance and forgiveness before God, to the reality that lives can change and be changed, and that when even the worst sins are forgiven great good can follow.

May that be our learning on this St. Francis day. Amen.